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Don Shula's Career Highlights

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Don Shula had his 325th coaching victory in the National Football League last Sunday. He now has one more than George Halas. That's one more than Papa Bear, one of the founders of the NFL who seemed to have coached for centuries.

Shula's current record is almost identical to that of Halas. and their winning percentages are very close: Shula with a winning percentage of 67.8% and Halas at 67.1%. Don Shula was the youngest coach to reach 100 victories, 200 victories, and 300 victories. Shula has just passed Halas at the age of 63, and would seem likely to go on to 400 victories before retirement. His teams have averaged a remarkable ten-plus victories a season, and Shula is now in his 31st year as a head coach. The last 24 of those seasons have been with the Miami Dolphins.

His greatest year was in 1972 when the Dolphins did what no other NFL has ever done, go undefeated, with a record of 17 straight wins. In all those seasons Don Shula teams have been below .500 only twice. Shula was head coach in Baltimore from 1963 to 1969, and then in 1970 took over the reigns of the Miami Dolphins and built them into a power house.

His teams now play in the stadium named for the man who hired him, Joe Robbie. Although Robbie and Shula had their difficult moments over the years, Joe Robbie had been smart enough to give Shula total control of the team, and Shula showed what he could do with it.

Like all of us Don Shula has mellowed over the years. By all accounts as a young coach, and in fact until fairly recently, he was a highly driven task master. His players talk about him much as Lombardi's players do about that legend, about his driven personality, his perfectionism, and his skills for meticulous organization. They also recall the blistering speeches he could give them about their incompetent play, with some of the worst of these coming after victories.

Perhaps the most interesting comments came from one of his daughters who talked about his obsessive personality, his incredible drive, and his insatiable need to win. She said that her dad could not even stand to lose at a family card game.

It is interesting to hear these sorts of comments, which are so similar to many made about highly successful people. They are

seldom well balanced, well rounded individuals, of the middle class ideal. They are driven and obsessive, with an almost pathological need to win. Somehow some people find ways to channel these characteristics into socially acceptable endeavors, like winning football games. Unfortunately others do not.

Shula's 325th victory came in Philadelphia under circumstances amazingly familiar in Don Shula's coaching career. With Dan Marino out for the season, backup quarterback Scott Mitchell was leading the Dolphins until the third quarter when he went down with a separated shoulder. The Dolphins were trailing 14-13 at the time, and they had to turn to Doug Pederson to bring them to victory.

From the beginning of his coaching career in the NFL Shula has faced similar problems. As coach of the 1965 Colts Shula was forced to go deep into his bench and use halfback Tom Matte at quarterback after he lost Johnny Unitas and Gary Cuozzo to injuries. That team beat the Rams to make the playoffs, and then lost to the Super Bowl bound Packers in a monumental tussle.

Even the perfect 1972 season was marked by an injury to the starting quarterback Bob Griese, who was replaced by the aging Earl Morrall after the fifth game. Morrall and Shula led them to 11 more victories before Griese returned in Super Bowl VII. I almost expected to see Earl Morrall come off the bench Sunday when Mitchell went down.

Instead we will see the Earl Morrall of the 90s this week, as Steve DeBerg will apparently take over the reigns at quarterback. Don't be surprised if DeBerg gives a Dorian Grey performance the rest of the season, and Shula takes the Dolphins to the Super Bowl. It would be a wonderful closing of the circle, especially if Marino were ready on Super Bowl Sunday.

So Don Shula's name sits atop the winners board in the National Football League, ahead of George Halas and Curly Lambeau. He just keeps on winning and winning and winning. "I never had a long-range plan, I just gave it all I had, every minute I had." When Don Shula says something like this, you don't look for the PR man. That's the essence of Don Shula.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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